

Fern Prairie patriarch here since 1906

You could call Albert Stebbins the King of Fern Prairie.

He appears, at least, to be the oldest person now living, from Fern Prairie. Albert, who first set eyes on the area in 1908, is 94, and looking forward to his 95th birthday on Oct. 13.

Though his father was a roving man, Albert has shaped his life around Fern Prairie and the Camas-Washougal area.

Albert, who now resides with his wife, Elsie, at 24615 NE Dresser Road, Camas, left Massachusetts with his parents when he was five months old. His father wanted to go to Iowa and settle on some farm land.

"My father was one of those people who always think the other place is better than where they're at," the old gentleman commented. He backed that statement up by adding that the family then moved to Missouri, and then back to Iowa.

In 1906, the family got the urge to move again, this time to the Northwest and Fern Prairie. Albert's parents bought about 40 acres near Lackamas Lake and settled down.

Albert and his new wife, Elsie, came "out west" on their honeymoon to visit Albert's folks in 1908. Two years later, on Dec. 31, 1910, the two came back again, this time to stay.

Albert and Elsie Stebbins purchased a 100-acre farm in Fern Prairie. As Albert now puts it, he "lived" on a farm, rather than "was" a farmer.

Albert's life has not been easy. His eyesight began failing when he was a junior in college in Ames, Iowa. He pursued his studies anyway, and was graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering.

"One of the big disappointments of my life, though, was not having the eyesight to follow up on my degree," he says now, regretfully.

His rare eye disease prevented him from pursuing many jobs. The disease, keratoconus, causes the eyeballs to bulge into a cone, blurring the vision. As Albert's eyes grew worse, his employment record developed into a series of odd jobs.

To make a living, Albert cut a lot of wood, did a number of odd jobs, and helped out on special projects. He was one of the many men who helped put the power lines through Fern Prairie.

During the Great

Depression of the 1930s, Albert says he grabbed any job he could, including hauling milk and cutting even more wood. When the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was formed, Albert joined thousands of other men out of work in aiding in construction projects.

When World War II began, Albert got a job at the Veterans (Barnes) Hospital in Vancouver. In 1946, he retired, still with little eyesight. His eyesight then was so bad he could read little else but the large headlines of newspapers.

At the age of 66, Stebbins landed a job with the old broom factory in Washougal during the late 1940s and early 1950s, until that business folded.

For the past 25 years or so, Albert has been puttering around the house, keeping things in shape, and, to his delight, taking care of his grandchildren occasionally.

And, since about 1964, when he was 82, Albert has been reading — not just newspaper headlines, but books.

After a number of surgical operations when he was 81 and 82, Albert could see clearly again. Two cornea transplants did the job.

Why didn't he get the operations before?

"The doctors weren't sure of the results of the transplant operations until about five years before my operations. A new instrument had been invented that could sew up the cornea. The doctors didn't have to do it by hand anymore," Albert explained.

He added, "You people with normal eyes just don't appreciate your eyesight."

When it was pointed out that it must have been decades since Albert saw his wife clearly, lively Elsie chimed in, "I think it must have been a disappointment."

Albert lost his right arm about five years ago because of cancer. This hasn't slowed him down either, as he continues to teach a Bible class at the Fern Prairie United Methodist Church.

Albert reads about three hours a day now. He said, smiling, "If I had my hearing back now, I'd be young again."

Among ready recollections Albert Stebbins has of Camas and Washougal are these:

"When my folks went to get feed in Camas, they

didn't dare leave the feed and wagon out in the street. All the cows in the street would eat it up."

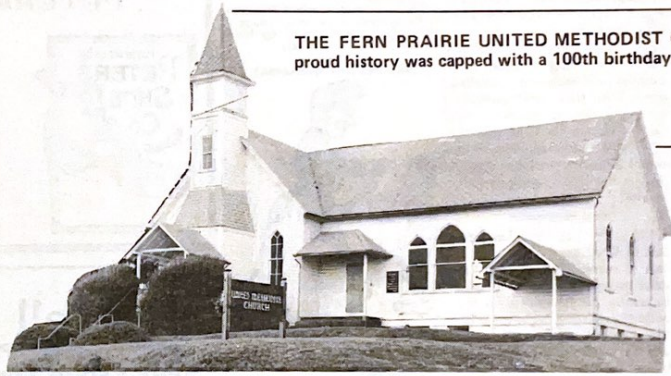
Albert also remembers the two-room school house in Fern Prairie. And, of course, the Methodist church, which celebrated its 100th birthday in 1973.

With his spirit, Albert can expect to celebrate his 100th birthday in 1981.

ELSIE AND
ALBERT STEBBINS



THE FERN PRAIRIE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH'S proud history was capped with a 100th birthday in 1973.



Mill almost missed Camas

The original paper mill promoters in this area tried to get land for the mill north of Washougal, but the settlers wanted too much for their land, so the promoters bought land at what later became Camas.

That, at least, is what Sarah Fletcher McLeod was quoted as saying in an interview published in the Clark County Sun, Nov. 16, 1923.

Mrs. McLeod, now deceased, was born at Lackamas Prairie in 1853. Her father was Thomas J. Fletcher, an Englishman who took up a land claim at the head of Lackamas Lake, just south of Green Mountain.

Fletcher traded this claim for Lady Island in 1859. Lady had acquired it from William Goodwin. Here, Fletcher raised horses, cows and sheep. The flood of 1862 forced the family to leave the island, though, and they moved to a school at a cattail swamp on the river in west Camas.

Nothing is now known of this "school."

Mrs. McLeod's education began at Lackamas. She attended a term there when she was five. This would have been about 1858. After moving to Lady Island, she attended school at Parker's landing (the first site known as Washougal). This constituted the first school built in the area, a log cabin, with a fireplace at one end.

This school near Parker's Landing was part of the county's first school district, No. 1, Washougal, created in 1852 by county commissioners while this area was still under Oregon Territorial government.

Parker's Landing then was due south of the McMakin home at Oak Park. The school was taught by a George Coffee. His name is referred to in historical accounts of Vancouver schools.

David C. Parker, incidentally, was the first permanent American settler

in this area. In 1845, he took up the first formal homestead in the state, in the area now known as Parker's Landing. The site of his river dock was first known, though, as Parker's Ferry.

A subdivision called Parkersville, is thought of as the first settlement at Washougal, a new Washougal townsite (the present one) was platted in 1880 by Joseph Durgan. He built the town's first store and residence there. Now, of course, Parker's Landing is part of the new Washougal, as well.

Mrs. McLeod felt the reason for the move of Washougal to its present site was because the landing was a rocky one, bad for boats, and the reef there extended three-quarters of the way across the river.

Mrs. McLeod was originally married to Mathias M. Gibbons, son of Joseph Gibbons of the Washougal area. She married McLeod in 1917.